

North Central Valley
JACL/CSUS Oral History Project

Oral History Interview

with

James Hajime Kurata

March 17, 1998
and
May 12, 1998

Lodi, California

Interviewed by
Arleen Mataga
for
Lodi JACL

Consortium of JACL Chapters
Florin-French Camp-Lodi-Placer-Stockton
California State University, Sacramento
Special Collections/University Archives
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*California State University, Sacramento
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MISSION STATEMENT

To collect and preserve the historical record of the multigenerational experience of Japanese Americans and others who befriended them in the communities of the JACL Chapters of this Consortium. The books produced will enhance the CSUS/Japanese American Archival Collection housed in the California State University, Sacramento Archives for study, research, teaching and exhibition. This unique Collection of life histories provides a permanent resource for the use of American and international scholars, researchers and faculty, as well as a lesson for future generations to appreciate the process of protecting and preserving the United States Constitution and America's democratic principles.

PREFACE

This JACL/CSUS Oral History Project provides completed books and tapes of Oral Histories presented to the interviewed subjects, to the California State University, Sacramento/Japanese American Archival Collection, and to the local JACL Chapters. Copyright is held by the Consortium of JACL Chapters and California State University, Sacramento. Photocopying is limited to a maximum of 20 pages per volume. Photographic rights of the primary portrait of interviewees are held by Gail Matsui Photography.

This project will continue the mission of the Florin JACL which recognized the necessity of interviewing Japanese Americans: "We have conducted these interviews with feelings of urgency. If we are to come away with lessons from this historic tragedy, we must listen to and become acquainted with the people who were there. Many of these historians are in their seventies, eighties and nineties. We are grateful that they were willing to share their experiences and to answer our questions with openness and thoughtfulness." This same urgency to conduct interviews is felt by the other North Central Valley (Sacramento/San Joaquin Valley) JACL Chapters. There are still many stories that must be told.

The Oral Histories in the Japanese American Archival Collection relate the personal stories of the events surrounding the exclusion, forced removal and internment of civilians and permanent resident aliens of Japanese ancestry. There is a wide variety of interviews of former internees, military personnel, people who befriended the Japanese Americans, Caucasians who worked in the internment camps and others, whose stories will serve to inform the public of the fundamental injustice of the government's action in the detention of the Japanese aliens and "non-aliens", so that the causes and circumstances of this and similar events may be illuminated and understood.

The population of those who lived through the World War II years is rapidly diminishing, and in a few years, will altogether vanish. Their stories must be preserved for the historians and researchers today and in the future.

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Interview:

Arleen Mataga is a member of the Lodi JACL and volunteered to work on the Oral History Committee. She met with Mr. James Hajime Kurata in his home in Lodi, California several times to discuss the interview process, to take the interview, to complete editing.

Interview Time and Place:

The interview took place on March 17, 1998 and on May 12, 1998 in Mr. Kurata's home.

Editing and Revision:

Mrs. Mataga and Mr. Kurata edited the transcribed manuscript and made changes and additions.

Mr. Kurata wrote his biographical summary and selected photographs to be included with his oral history. Marion Kanemoto completed the photo layout.

Aeko Fenelon did the transcription and other word processing.

Tapes and Interview Records:

Copies of the bound transcript and the tapes will be kept by the Stockton Japanese American Citizens League and in the University Archives at the Library, California State University, Sacramento, 6000 J Street, Sacramento, California, 95819

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

This is an oral history of James "Jim" Hajime Kurata born in Lodi, California on June 27, 1918. His father, Yosaku Kurata, died during the flu epidemic in the winter of 1918. Jim's mother married Yosaku's younger brother, Kenji Kurata, shortly thereafter.

Most of Jim's early years were spent on grape farms where his step-father was employed by fruit companies in the Acampo area north of Lodi. He graduated from Lodi Union High School in 1937.

In February 1940 he enrolled in engineering courses at the College of the Pacific (now University of the Pacific). In September 1941, before he could return for the fall semester, he was inducted into military service.

In February 1943 he was transferred from military assignment at Fort Sill, Oklahoma to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, to join other Nisei pre-war draftees to become the nucleus of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. After a full year of training, the Combat Team was sent to Europe and into combat in Italy, France, and Germany. It was during combat in France that Jim received a battlefield commission as second lieutenant.

Jim was released from active Army duty in February 1946. Thereafter he was employed as a highway engineer by the California Division of Highways, now known as the California Department of Transportation. He passed the state civil engineering examination and was certified as a professional engineer in March 1959.

Jim and his wife Misa (Mildred) are parents of a daughter and a son. Their children are married and have given them five grandchildren.

[Begin Tape One, Side A]

MATAGA: This is an interview with James Hajime Kurata, nickname of Jim. Jim is 79 years old. This interview is taking place in Lodi, California on March 17, 1998. The interviewer is Arleen Mataga and this oral history is part of the North Central Valley Japanese American Citizens League/California State University, Sacramento Oral History Project. This is Tape One, Side One.

MATAGA: Jim, where and when were you born?

KURATA: I was born in Lodi on June 27, 1918.

MATAGA: What did your father do?

KURATA: My father was a farmer.

MATAGA: What type of farming did he do?

KURATA: Well, my real father, Yosaku Kurata, died when I was about a year old. My stepfather, Kenji Kurata, who was my real father's brother, worked in grapes in the Lodi area by Acampo. That's where I grew up, on the grape farm.

MATAGA: And your mom?

KURATA: My mother, did some work in the fields but not very often. She was a housewife and she took care of the children, my brothers and sisters and I. Her maiden name was Kotoyo Takao.

MATAGA: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

KURATA: I have two brothers and two sisters. Now, one of my sisters is deceased. [I was the oldest; my sister, Merry, was second; brother Joseph was third;

KURATA: another sister, Hattie, now deceased was fourth; and my youngest brother was Fred. Merry's given Japanese name was Hisaye, Joseph's was Yoshito, Hattie's was Sueko, and Fred's was Sadaji.]

MATAGA: Where did you fall in the family?

KURATA: I was the first born in the family. I'm the oldest of five children.

MATAGA: What do you remember about family life?

KURATA: Well, I grew like most juveniles, I guess, I can still recall having scraps with the rest of the children, my brothers and sisters. But, since I was the oldest I would be the one to get scolded for anything I did that caused my brothers or sisters to cry. I think I was left with a lot more responsibility than my brothers and sisters.

MATAGA: What did you do for entertainment?

KURATA: As I recall, when I was a youngster I made my own toys. I know we weren't wealthy enough to have our parents buy toys for us. So I do recall making little toys with pieces of wood and board and entertain myself that way. My brothers and sisters would play among themselves than with me. So I was more or less independent.

MATAGA: What about family expectations?

KURATA: I don't know that we could call anything expectations. I think we were trying to survive more than trying to set goals and ambitions. We were youngsters.

MATAGA: All of you helped at the farm?

KURATA: Yes at various times as we were growing up. After we became teenagers I think we helped a bit more. Especially my brother Joseph, who was three years younger than me. I remember going to high school and working at the

KURATA: same time. I used to help with the irrigation of the vineyard and also to sulfur the grapevines the old fashion way where we had to pack our sulfuring machine on our back and walk through the vineyards.

MATAGA: What kind of values did your parents teach you?

KURATA: Well, they tried to teach me to be honest and I know they tried to discipline us and to obey our parents.

MATAGA: Spanking?

KURATA: I beg your pardon.

MATAGA: Spanking? Discipline?

KURATA: Spanking, yes I do remember my mother spanking me once. Although I was probably spanked more often than that. I do remember one occasion. I don't recall why I was spanked, but I was.

MATAGA: The values were there many that you rejected that your parents tried to instill?

KURATA: Values, well, I don't recall that I rejected any values. I just accepted the values my parents tried to instill in me.

MATAGA: Were you and your family part of Japantown or was there a Japantown here then?

KURATA: No there was a Japantown here in Lodi years ago.

MATAGA: There was or was not?

KURATA: There was a Japantown. What we called a Japantown, just two blocks on Main St. in Lodi. My father would go into town occasionally. He used to like to play Hana and gamble. So once in a while I would be able to go with him. I would go see a movie while he entertained himself playing cards with the other Issei men.

MATAGA: Did you participate in any church, or "Y", or scout, or band, or picnic, or something?

KURATA: Well, I joined the Boy Scouts when I was eleven years old. A couple of my friends, Lloyd Fujitani and Martin Wilson, were Boy Scouts and they introduced me to scouting . I stayed in the scouting program for many years. Eventually I earned my Eagle Scout [Badge] and before I left the troop to go into other fields, I was an Assistant Scout Master. [My Scoutmaster, Mark Wade, was very influential in my life. He taught me things that I valued later in my life.]

MATAGA: Did you do any classes for the Japanese culture like Judo, or Kendo or whatever?

KURATA: No I didn't have the opportunity to get into town that often. My parents were not that enthused about my getting into Kendo or judo. I can't recall that I was particularly interested in learning those different martial arts or programs that they had for young children. I do recall going to Japanese language school. I didn't want to go because I didn't feel that I'd ever go to Japan to live. I thought that English was all I needed to know. I regret now that I didn't go as my parents wanted me to. I attended Japanese language school for about a year and a half and finally got my way and stopped going.

MATAGA: What school did you go to?

KURATA: I started out at Bruella Grammar School when I was seven years old, I don't know why my parents didn't start me when I was 6 years. I graduated from Bruella Grammar School in 1933 and then went to Lodi Union High School, where I graduated four years later in 1937.

MATAGA: How did you feel about school, how were you treated?

KURATA: I can't recall that I was treated any differently than any of the Caucasian students. I don't recall any discrimination at all. There may have been and I've forgotten, but I can't recall any now. The only one discrimination that I do recall was when I was a Boy Scout. I was not able to swim in the Lodi Municipal Swimming Pool, the city had a swimming pool and Asians were not permitted entrance. [The ban was lifted a short time later before I left Scouting.]

MATAGA: Were you invited to the homes of Caucasian children?

KURATA: Yes, my friends would invite me. I don't recall the parents particularly inviting me, but I do recall that some of my friends invited me to their homes.

MATAGA: So your friends were both Caucasian and Japanese?

KURATA: Yes.

MATAGA: Hispanic? Were there any Hispanic back then?

KURATA: Yes, we did have some but not as many as, of course, we have today. I remember a couple of them going to both the grammar and high school. [They were nice kids.]

MATAGA: What about teachers?

KURATA: Teachers were all very good to me. None, that I recall, ever discriminated against me. I know they all gave me grades that I earned. I don't think they discriminated against any Japanese Americans at school as grading goes.

MATAGA: As a child did you consider yourself Japanese, Japanese American, or American?

- KURATA:** I think I must have felt that I was Japanese but I didn't feel discrimination that I felt later in my life. As youngsters we never thought about discrimination. I got along just fine with my Caucasian friends.
- MATAGA:** Did your parents have any contact with the school?
- KURATA:** Not really, they didn't as I recall, they never participated in school activities primarily because of the language barrier.
- MATAGA:** What did they expect regarding your schoolwork?
- KURATA:** What did they?
- MATAGA:** Expect? I assume that you were a good student so it didn't matter.
- KURATA:** Oh, you mean my parents?
- MATAGA:** Yes.
- KURATA:** My mother was particularly interested that all the children receive a good education and did well in school. Consequently, I think we tried harder.
- MATAGA:** What kind of dinner table conversation did you have?
- KURATA:** I really don't recall any particular topic, I think we probably talked about family affairs and things like that and maybe about friends. I know we never talked about politics or anything deep.
- MATAGA:** What about your teenage years, what kinds of problems, joys, dating, interracial dating?
- KURATA:** Well, I didn't have a desire to date. I did have a Caucasian girlfriend, Rosetta Perkins, for a while in grammar school when I was in eighth grade. That was my first introduction to a girlfriend. In high school I can't say that I had a particular girl that I wanted to go steady with. I was too interested in my studies and sports and associated with my male friends.

MATAGA: Did your parents say anything about the Caucasian girlfriend.?

KURATA: Did I what?

MATAGA: Did your parents say anything about that Caucasian girlfriend?

KURATA: No not the one in grammar school because they never knew about the girl.

MATAGA: What was a typical Nisei date like?

KURATA: What was a typical Nisei date like? I don't know because I really didn't have what they call date. I did associate with Nisei girls in school but I can't recall that I ever went to dances or social activities with them. Of course, those things were kind of frowned on in my days. Boys and girls weren't allowed to go out together by themselves.

MATAGA: Group dating then?

KURATA: Well, if you call parties and things like that. We dated Japanese girls when attending high school social parties but that was about the extent that I recall about my dating experience.

MATAGA: Who did you talk to if you had any problems?

KURATA: Well usually with my mother, if I did, but I can't recall that I talked to her probably partly because of my pride. I didn't feel I could explain in Japanese so she could understand.

MATAGA: How would you describe your childhood and teenage years in your home, at school, and in the community?

KURATA: Well I don't recall too much about those years. I can't say very much about those years. [I helped with chores at home, and looked after my younger brothers and sisters whenever our mother went to do some work.]

MATAGA: And you didn't feel you had any racial prejudice at that time?

KURATA: No, I can't recall any incidents that, I can remember or [recognize as being discriminatory].

MATAGA: Did you speak Japanese or English at home?

KURATA: Well I tried to speak Japanese at home but there were times that I wanted to talk to my mother about some things and I didn't know how to express myself in Japanese and I know that she wouldn't understand if I spoke strictly English. So in that respect I was sorry that I didn't learn the Japanese language much better than I did. [Often, it was a mixture of English and Japanese.]

MATAGA: What type of work did you do?

KURATA: I was a civil engineer with the old Division of Highways, now known as Caltrans [California Department of Transportation]. I worked in several departments-construction, design, planning, and traffic during my almost 35 years with them.]

MATAGA: You forgot about, when you talk about school you forgot about your college. You didn't mention that.

KURATA: [deletion] After I graduated from high school in 1937, I stayed home and worked for about 2 1/2 years to earn some money so I could go to college. I had decided that was what I wanted do, to go to college because I enjoyed both math and science. Engineering was the field I wanted to get into. After two and a half years I enrolled at the old College of the Pacific now known as the University of the Pacific. I enrolled in the college engineering courses. I still remember what my counselor, James Corson, told me, "You know you're Japanese American and you may have difficulty in getting employment as an

KURATA: engineer.” He thought he was forewarning me about the troubles that I might encounter once I graduated, and so I told him. [I had enough confidence in myself and my ability to be successful in the engineering field.]

MATAGA: He was Caucasian?

KURATA: Yes. I told him I would take my chances. I would try extra hard and I’d find a spot and, I did so. In 1941, Sept 1941, I thought I would return to college again after summer vacation, but instead I got greetings from Uncle Sam telling me that I was going to be inducted into military service. At that time they were drafting civilians for what we thought would be a couple of years of military training. While I was taking basic training in Camp Robert California, Pearl Harbor was attacked, December 7, 1941. That meant that we were entering the war, it was the start of World War II.

MATAGA: You were active in the army?

KURATA: Yes, I remained in military service until after World War II ended. I was released from military service in February of 1946.

MATAGA: When Pearl Harbor happened what were you doing?

KURATA: It was a weekend and I had gone home for the weekend [from Camp Roberts, California, where I had been training]. This occurred on Sunday morning. I was in the bus returning to Camp Roberts when I saw a newspaper boy showing a newspaper with the headlines that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. That was my first knowledge that Pearl Harbor had been bombed.

MATAGA: [inaudible]

KURATA: So when I returned to camp, of course, the Commander called us all in together and notified us [about the Pearl Harbor attack by Japan and what would be expected of us in the military].

MATAGA: Japanese specifically, or everybody?

KURATA: That was everybody. In that particular unit that I was in, we were getting basic training. There were two other Niseis with me. After a few weeks all of us, before we were able to complete our basic training, were reassigned. We were given reassignment to different military units that were patrolling the Pacific Coast. I was assigned to a National Guard Division that was patrolling the Pacific Coast in Southern California. I was assigned to an artillery unit of the 40th National Guard Division in the Los Angeles area. We were patrolling the coast in the event that an attack occurred on the coastline. After several months with them, I was transferred to another unit in San Francisco that was being organized. From San Francisco all of us were sent to Fort Ord for training as military police.

MATAGA: Do you know about what year that was?

KURATA: This was in the early part of 1942. Then Executive Order, I don't remember the number [9066], came out for the Japanese living on the west coast states to evacuate. I realized that my brothers and sisters and my parents were going to be evacuated soon. About that time I had gotten an order to be transferred to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, for non combat duty. The weekend before I was to leave for Oklahoma I requested a leave to visit my family because I didn't know when I would see them again. The request was refused. When the

KURATA: weekend came I checked around to see if I would be assigned to any duty in camp. When I saw that I wasn't going to be, I left camp and went AWOL. I came home and visited with the family to say goodbye. I returned to camp and I was not missed. No one knew that I had gone AWOL. A couple of days later I was shipped out to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where I was assigned to the interview [and classification] section where new recruits came in and were processed. We would interview them and classify them according to different military types of work comparable to their civilian occupation.

MATAGA: Were the other Niseis moved inland like you were?

KURATA: Who?

MATAGA: The other two Niseis in your group?

KURATA: Yes, all Niseis...

[End Tape One, Side A]

[Begin Tape One, Side B]

MATAGA: Jim, you were talking about

KURATA: I was talking about all the other Niseis that had been drafted into the military who were all shipped inland to different military posts away from the west coast. They were all given non combat duty. Also, some were assigned to quarter master units and some were assigned to medical units. I was assigned to the section where all the new recruits came in and were interviewed and given their assignments to the organization that they would be future members of. Early in 1943, I was ordered to report to Camp Shelby, Mississippi. Of course, at that time I wasn't aware that the 442nd Regimental Combat Team

KURATA: was being activated at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. I was unaware of what my assignment might be but when I got to Camp Shelby there were other Nisei soldiers from other locations and other various army units being assigned there along with me. We were told that we were going to be trained to be part of the cadre that will be eventually training recruits that will be forming the 442 Regimental Combat Team. I was assigned to the 522nd Field Artillery Battalion, a component of the 442 R.C.T. As the recruits came in from the Hawaiian islands, as well from various states on the mainland, I helped train them. After almost a year and a half of training in Camp Shelby we were shipped overseas to Europe. As I recall it took about a month to get to Italy and we disembarked at a seaport in Italy. I believe the name of the seaport was Brindisi and then we rode on a train from there to Naples, Italy, where we were assigned to a staging area. From there we traveled north through Rome. Just north of Rome we got into our first baptism of fire. That was coming face to face with combat for the first time. We fought up north to the outskirts of Florence and then we were transferred. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team was transferred from Italy to southern France, Marseilles. We traveled up the Rhone Valley into northeast France. Do you want me to continue?

MATAGA: Yes, whatever?

KURATA: We entered combat in northeast France. We fought through the town of Bruyeres. The area that we fought in was called the Vosges Mountains. It was there in the fall of 1944 that we fought our most serious battle, where we lost a lot of our comrade Nisei soldiers. Shortly after we were pulled back,

KURATA: relieved by another unit, we were called back to rescue a lost battalion of another unit that was adjacent to us.

MATAGA: A Caucasian unit?

KURATA: Yes, it was part of 36th division. It was the so-called "Lost Battalion". So the 442nd went to rescue them. Heavy loss of life, heavy casualty among the 442nd personnel. Eventually our unit, 442nd, reached the "Lost Battalion" and rescued them. We suffered more casualties than the number of men that were rescued from this fighting. After we were relieved, the 442 was sent down to Nice in southern France. The 442 having suffered heavy losses and decimated, were being reorganized with new recruits, new replacements. This period of time that we were down there was called the "Champagne Campaign" because we able to take time off from combat for much needed rest and recreation. We were reorganizing ourselves [for the next] assignment whatever it may be. Early 1945 the field artillery separated from the 442 infantry portion of the combat team. The infantry and the combat engineers were part of the combat unit, sent back to Italy to continue fighting northward. The 522 Field Artillery Battalion was sent north into Germany across the Rhine River. By that time the Germans were retreating and we were chasing them as rapidly as we could. Eventually the Germans surrendered in early May, and that ended the war in Europe. I remained with 522 Field Artillery Battalion in Germany as part of the Army of occupation until later in 1945 when I was able to be sent home for my discharge. By the time I left Germany in November and the time I got discharged it was Christmas.

MATAGA: Were your parents and your brothers and sisters in camp during that time?

KURATA: Yes they had been in camp but eventually my two sisters left camp. They went to Cleveland where they got jobs doing housework. One of my brothers, Joseph, had left camp and was working, I believe in Cincinnati. My youngest brother, Fred, was still going to high school in Rohwer where my parents and family had been relocated to in Rohwer

MATAGA: They were in that camp?

KURATA: In Arkansas. In June 1944, my youngest brother, Fred, graduated from high school in relocation camp, Rohwer. Immediately he was drafted. He was sent to military training. During the period we were in Nice, France, he came over as a replacement for the 442nd. My other brother, Joseph, who had gone to Cincinnati, was also drafted. He was being trained as a replacement for 442. But by the time, before he completed his training, I believe World War II in Europe had ceased, had ended. He asked to get into the Counter Intelligence Corp Service and he went to the Counter Intelligence School and eventually he ended up in Japan. But it was after the war that he reached Japan. So although he served a lot of time in Japan, it was actually after the war that his service took place.

MATAGA: So your parents went from Rohwer back to Acampo?

KURATA: Yes, well all of us brothers, boys were in the service. My parents, accompanied by my sister Hattie, returned from Rohwer to Acampo where we had our home and a small vineyard.

MATAGA: And it was still there when they came back?

KURATA: Yes, it was still there. It had been under the care of Everett McKenzie, a Caucasian friend of ours and so they were able to return home. Although during the war the bunk house that we had for the grape pickers that we hired during grape picking season burned down. There was insurance fortunately, but I don't think that we could have rebuilt the bunkhouse for that amount of money that we got from the insurance company. It was a two story building, the lower story was used for a garage, and eating facility for the grape pickers that we hired. Upstairs was used as a bunkhouse. While I was in the military service and before we were shipped overseas I tried to get permission to come back to California in order to check the home place. The military would not give me permission even though I was in the uniform [of the U.S. Army].

MATAGA: When you got out of the service and came back here to Acampo?

KURATA: Yes, before I came back, before I left Europe, I was approached by a Colonel who tried to persuade me to reenlist in the Army to go to Japan because they needed a lot of Niseis over there to help the Japanese people and to introduce democracy to them. [Deletion] I told him that I had parents to look after when the time comes up for my discharge. I thought I would want to get out because I had only my sister to oversee them. Both of my brothers, Joseph and Fred, chose to remain in the service and reenlist. I could have stayed in as a commissioned officer. I had received a battle field commission during the war. One of our officers was disabled ,and instead getting a new replacement officer without any combat experience, they wanted to promote someone that had already had combat experience. So I was one of the six Niseis that were selected for battle field commission. [Only two of us are alive today].

MATAGA: The officer that was disabled was he Caucasian?

KURATA: Yes, he was Caucasian. [Edwin Wood of Oklahoma]

MATAGA: So this was unusual to have a Japanese...

KURATA: Yeah, so there were only six of us Nisei that were in the Field Artillery Battalion comprised of 600 men. Nisei officers, six of us that received battle field commissions, were the only officers from the field artillery unit. In the infantry there were many Nisei officers who had received their commission I think almost all of them were from the Hawaiian Islands and they may have received their commission through the ROTC program.

MATAGA: Was it difficult when you came back to Acampo?

KURATA: Yes, I guess it was. When I returned home I wanted to go back to college. And I wanted to re-enroll, but the College of Pacific had temporarily suspended all the engineering courses during the war and they hadn't started the engineering program again yet after the war. So I thought, well I'll see if I can get a job first. Prior to the war I had taken a civil service examination with the State. I passed, and so when I got called for military service (I had not planned on working until I got my degree any way) I asked them to put my name on the inactive eligibility list, which they did (if you were a civilian inducted for military service). So when I came back and I discovered that I couldn't go back to the College of Pacific yet because during W.W.II they had suspended their engineering courses, I thought I could work until their engineering program was reinstated. I notified the State that I was available for employment. Immediately I got an offer to go to work with the Division of Highways. So I took that job, and in the meantime, I enrolled in

KURATA: correspondence courses and continued my engineering studies. I never did get back to college because I thought I was doing pretty well through the correspondence course, and once you start earning money its hard to give that up and go back to school, [especially when you are receiving promotions]. During that period of time I did encounter discrimination. Once when I was still in my military uniform and I had taken some clothes to French Cleaners (now non-existent) in Lodi and they wouldn't accept it. I found out that it was because a relative of the owner of the dry cleaning establishment had been killed in the South Pacific in the war against Japan. And in another occasion when my sister, her boyfriend and I; the three of us, went to get a milkshake. We went in, and there were three or four girl waitresses. They knew we were there but they never came to wait on us and I was going to go up there and talk to them but my sister told me to just walk out quietly, and so we walked out.

MATAGA: Did you have any feeling of discrimination on the job?

KURATA: Any discrimination on the job? Not actually, but I would have but it turned out for the better. [Deletion] Once I was going to be assigned to a project with another fellow, "Red" Daniels, who had been in the service, in the Navy during World War II, and he had charge of Japanese prisoners. He told his wife (before he had met me) when he heard that a Nisei was coming onto that job, "I don't know whether I can get along with him or not." His wife said, "You know, he's just as American as you are." Then I guess he saw everything in a different light. When I met him I was friendly with him and he was friendly with me. He told me about this a few years later about what had

KURATA: happened. But I don't recall any discrimination. He told me that he wondered, "How am I going to get along with him because of his Japanese ancestry." I remember on another construction job that I was assigned to, I was the resident engineer assigned to that project. One of the contractor's men told his supervisor that he was not going to take any orders from a "Jap". He hadn't seen or met me yet, and of course I didn't know any thing about his feelings. When I went up to the plant and I met him and talked with him he didn't show any animosity toward me, surprisingly. Some time later he saw me and he told me that he had told his boss that he would not take any orders and his boss had told him that I was working with the State and he's not one of the Japanese from Japan. So we had a drink together that evening. We just happened to be in the same bar. He saw me there, and started the conversation, and told me how he had felt. Then he told me what a swell guy I was. Other than those two experiences I don't recall any thing where I felt I was being discriminated against [or disliked because of my ancestry] during all my working years.

MATAGA: When did you meet your wife?

KURATA: I met my wife in 1952. We were engaged in March 1953 and married in June 1953 in Berkeley. It was a little later in my life when I got married. I was almost 35 when I got married.

MATAGA: Was she from around here?

KURATA: Oh no, she was from Concord, California.

MATAGA: How did you meet her?

KURATA: Through a mutual friend. You know the old Japanese way, baishakunin.

MATAGA: So was it baishakunin?

KURATA: We were introduced that way and then we started going steady.

MATAGA: But it wasn't a match, it was just a...

KURATA: No, it was just a friendly introduction.

MATAGA: What was her maiden name?

KURATA: She prefers to be called Misako Mildred Kurata. To some people she's known as Misako or Misa especially to her old friends. And Mildred to most of her later friends.

MATAGA: She used to be Morodomi?

KURATA: Morodomi, yes. That was her maiden name.

MATAGA: And your children, you have two?

KURATA: Yes, two: a girl and a boy. Our daughter, Janis Purcell, lives in Pleasant Hill with her husband, John Purcell, and their two children. They have one son, Patrick, and one daughter, Jenna. Then our other child is a son, Denis Kurata, who lives in Davis. He's married to Patricia Chan and has three children, two girls and a son. Cheryl is the oldest, Jessica is next, and James Raymond the youngest.

MATAGA: Do they know Japanese? Can they speak Japanese?

KURATA: No, I'm afraid not. They did attend Japanese school for a short time while they were going to high school, on weekends. But they never followed through with it and they never or very seldom come into contact with Japanese speaking people.

MATAGA: They were raised here in Lodi?

KURATA: Yes, they grew up in Lodi. Both of them went to UC Davis, graduated from there. Our daughter went an additional two years to Bakersfield State College training to be a nurse.

MATAGA: Have you discussed the war experience with your children?

KURATA: Yes, after a fashion, I didn't force myself on them. When they would ask questions I would tell them what I did during my younger years. [Deletion]

[End Tape One, Side B]

[Begin Tape Two, Side A]

MATAGA: You were talking about your children. If you explained to them about your activities in the war.

KURATA: Yes, at different times I've talked about my wartime experiences. My son especially has been interested in what I did during World War II. So whenever they ask me about my military service I would tell them, I would never force myself on them. I have several books about the 442nd Regimental Combat Team that they can refer to if they'd like to know more about what we did during World War II.

MATAGA: Do your children, do you believe your children feel part of the Japanese community?

KURATA: No, I don't think so because most of their friends are Caucasian and people of other races. So they don't really go to any functions that are Japanese American. Although my son and his daughter, Cheryl, are taking Taiko lessons, in that respect they do come in contact with Japanese people.

MATAGA: What are the most important things that have happened to you in recent years?

KURATA: The most important things. I would say our children doing well. Both are married and happily married. They have children, our grandchildren. Of course we look forward to seeing them as often as possible, that's very important to us. We also like to travel. We try to get as much traveling and sightseeing in as much as possible while we are still physically able to. We've covered almost all of the United States now, made several trips and have been to Japan and have seen seven European countries. We go to the Hawaiian Island periodically to the 442nd Reunions. Those are the things that kept us going, keeping us busy.

MATAGA: How do you feel about the redress and reparations?

KURATA: I think that was a fine thing our government did, to get redress to the Japanese that were forced to move into relocation camps. Lot of people refer to them as prisons, I guess. I feel that they were well deserving of redress especially, my parents. While I was serving in the United States Army they were evacuated from their homes and placed in relocation camps with armed guards around them. Makes you wonder.

MATAGA: If you could imagine that there were no World War II, what do you think your life would be like?

KURATA: It's kind of hard to picture just what it would be like. I think I would have pursued a life work that I had started before Pearl Harbor and military service. I think I would probably have been able to complete my college education and still gone into the line of work that I did. Although I didn't graduate from college, I did study hard enough and passed the examination to be a registered civil engineer.

MATAGA: If you could imagine that there was another evacuation order what would you do?

KURATA: Well, that's a hypothetical question. I think I would probably object strenuously to evacuation. I think I would defend my right as an American citizen and would want be treated like any other patriotic American citizen.

MATAGA: After redress, what kind of role do you think Japanese Americans should play in society?

KURATA: Well, I think they should make it their responsibility to be good American citizens. Try to do all they can to help our country progress economically, socially and present a good picture of the United States to the rest of the world. [Be active in your community.]

MATAGA: What kind of life do you see for your children and grandchildren?

KURATA: I think they're being raised in a pretty tough world. There's so much more temptation now than there ever was before. The population is increasing, we live closer to each other, in my days when the population in California was much less, you were able think for yourself and do lots of things without being crowded, or interference from other people. Now with all the problems that we have, especially with crime, they're going to have to look at life in a different light than we did. [Many challenges lie ahead for them.]

MATAGA: What do you think are the greatest contributions by the Nisei men and women?

KURATA: I think the biggest contribution to our country is the scarcity of crime among the Japanese population. Our crime record, Japanese Americans in this country, is probably about the lowest of any racial group. I think that's

KURATA: something we should be proud of and that's something that we should continue with. Be good law abiding citizens and try to elevate ourselves, continue to elevate ourselves. Be good responsible American Citizens

MATAGA: If you were giving advise to young people today what would you tell them?

KURATA: Well, I would tell them to study hard and get a good education while they're young and able to do so. And to keep out of trouble, be good law abiding citizens and try to do well in all things that you do. Be a good parent when you get married and have children. [Recognize your responsibility.]

MATAGA: We are ending the end of this interview, is there anything else you would like to say?

KURATA: No, I think we've covered everything pretty well about my life.

MATAGA: Do you have any questions for me?

KURATA: No, I can't think of any questions.

MATAGA: Thank you for sharing your story with us. This is your interview. You know way back in the beginning when you said you were raised by your father, your father died when you were young.

KURATA: Yes, so when I was referring to my father I was referring to my stepfather.

MATAGA: Was it common for brothers to marry their widow here in the United States?

KURATA: I think it just happened this way because my stepfather was living close by. My real father had gone back to Japan to bring my mother to America. He waited for her when she cleared. Well, actually they lived near Stockton when he died, during a flu epidemic. About a year later, I'm just assuming, I guess my stepfather took over the responsibility and they just decided to marry.

MATAGA: Do you know how your father got over here in the first place?

KURATA: How what?

MATAGA: Your father and your step father.

KURATA: No, I guess they were like all the others that came. Opportunities here were better than they were in Japan. I think my father, both my father and step father, came to the Hawaiian island first and probably worked in the sugar plantation and pineapples. And later came to California.

MATAGA: I assume none of them spoke English.

KURATA: No, you know the ones that came over most of them knew very little English. They learned English, some did. I know my mother went to night school for a couple of years off and on. She spoke English better than my father or my step father did.

MATAGA: You were so young, you always considered him your father, I assume.

KURATA: Yeah.

MATAGA: He was really your uncle, the father to all of your brothers and sisters.

KURATA: Yes, my stepfather was really my uncle. Of course blood, the blood is all the same. Different parents. My life has been mostly with Caucasians which didn't help improve my Japanese vocabulary.

MATAGA: Were there not many Japanese families in Acampo?

KURATA: Oh yeah there were a lot of Japanese, a whole lot [deletion] more Japanese than there are now Especially, Japanese speaking Japanese [Issei]. Of course I didn't associate very much with the Japanese speaking only because I can't understand [Japanese well enough]. I remember in high school they had some Nisei that were speaking Japanese and I didn't think you should be speaking Japanese (in public schools). Because they [Caucasians] may think

KURATA: you're talking about them. Many minorities speak their ancestral language. A lot of Mexicans do that, Chinese do that, but the Nisei, you didn't find many that did that unless they were Kibei or [Issei] that spoke Japanese a lot anyway. And when I was in the military, except when I was in the 442nd, I was first assigned to a Caucasian or almost all Caucasian units. After W.W.II, I worked for the Division of Highways, now Caltrans. I was the first Nihonjin hired there. I said I passed the civil service exam when I went to get interviewed for a job. Cliff Temby was going to interview me and he told someone in their office that he wasn't going to hire me (sight unseen) because I was Japanese. But when I went there and presented myself for the interview he said he'd hire me. Two years later a highway contractor put on a big party, and we were both there, and I was talking to Cliff. I said to him "You remember when you hired me? I had heard you weren't going to hire me, sight unseen." He told me, "Well, I'm sure glad I hired you." So there's another case of racial discrimination, or that could have been, but didn't materialize.

MATAGA: You over came both.

KURATA: Most of my encounters where there was initially possible discrimination didn't turn out that way. All the people that have come to know me, change their minds. I gave a talk before the American Legion Auxiliary years ago about prejudice against Japanese Americans. My son's wife, Patricia, is a school teacher and she asked me to give a talk about the evacuation of Japanese Americans during World War II to a couple of her classes. Years ago I hated getting up in front of people to give a talk so I joined the Toastmasters in

KURATA: Lodi. I was a member for about seven years. That's how I've overcome stage fright . It doesn't bother me now to go up before a group of people as long as I know what I'm talking about. I had to improve my public speaking because in my work I'd have to make presentations before the City Council or County organizations to discuss what our future highway plan would be improving and how. I thought, well, I'm going to have to learn how to do that, so I joined Toastmasters. So, I think I've accomplished a lot more than I thought I would . I've gotten pretty old now. I didn't really want to get re-nominated for the Board and you know no one asked me to this date to be on the JACL Board again. Someone was supposed to ask me, but apparently forgot to do so.

MATAGA: It's in the minutes, I think. I think it was in the minutes that you were to be asked.

KURATA: Yeah it's in the minutes that I was supposed to be asked but nobody asked me. I went to a meeting and I did mention it. I remember that Tom Kurahara wasn't on the Board so I did mention that Tom could take my place.

MATAGA: You are coming to the meetings aren't you? Aren't you coming to the meetings and everything?

KURATA: Yeah I have been.

MATAGA: Well, you're a Board Member.

KURATA: We had a JACL chapter organized for about one year (1940) and then of course World War II and evacuation ended all that. After the war there were some Nisei here that wanted to reactivate the JACL, but some opposition to it

KURATA: developed because there were some people against Mike Masaoka. You know during W.W.II Mike Masaoka wanted to cooperate with the Federal Government on the evacuation order. Mike Masaoka felt the Japanese weren't strong enough politically to be able to oppose the government. "The best way to prove you are an American", the government had said, "if you're a good loyal American, do what we tell you to do." That's the kind of attitude the American government had. So Mike felt that it was the best thing for us to do because politically we have nothing. Not like today. Today we have a lot of good legislators and people in high places in government who would side with us. We had nobody in those days. So there were Japanese people here that held that against Mike Masaoka because he cooperated too much with the government.

MATAGA: Masaoka?

KURATA: Mike Masaoka, Mr. JACL. So instead of reactivating our JACL Chapter we organized the Lodi Nisei Civic Society, an independent group just for Lodi shortly after W.W.II. We carried on the social functions for the Japanese community: picnics, Christmas parties, and remember the old Japanese movies that we used to have? We sponsored all those things for the Japanese Community. Eventually, we were able to get the JACL back, I think it was in 1971. In the Nisei Civic Society I was pretty active. I was president two different times. Then when the JACL eventually reactivated I thought the younger people could take over the leadership in the Japanese American community activities of Lodi.

[End Tape Two, Side A]

Session Two

[Begin Tape Two, Side B]

MATAGA: This is the continuation of the history of James Hajime Kurata. Today's date is May 12, 1998. This is tape two, side two. Okay Jim, we found out that your history was so wonderful that we needed these extra stories that you have. Why don't you start where you'd like to.

KURATA: Okay, there are a couple of experiences that I would like to relate. The first one is a human interest story. This experience began during our pursuit of the German Army. We were well into Germany, not far from Munich, when our Artillery Battery encountered a group of Jewish ex-prisoners.

MATAGA: Do you remember about what year that was?

KURATA: This was in May of 1945. These prisoners had been released from the infamous Dachau prison by the fleeing German Army. These displaced Jews were still in their prison garments. They were inadequately clothed for the cold weather and they were starving, hungry. Two of these ex-prisoners begged us to let them join our unit. They said they'd be willing to do whatever chores we might ask them to do. One of ex-prisoners named Morris had been a journalist and spoke seven different languages, including English

KURATA: and German. The other, whose name was Bloom, had been a tailor. Both were originally from Lithuania before being taken by the Germans as prisoners. Our Commander okayed their request to join us. Morris would serve us as an interpreter and the former tailor would work altering clothes for our GIs whose clothes were not fitting properly, which is typically true of Japanese people. Morris was married, but his wife's whereabouts were unknown since they had been separated and sent to different prisons. The prisoners were separated by sex. After the war in Europe ended and we became part of the army of occupation. Morris wanted to find his wife. I helped him by driving him to various places in Germany. We visited many locations where groups of Jewish ex-prisoners were being housed and fed. But we were unsuccessful in our search. Eventually in November 1945 I received my orders to return to the United States to be discharged from the Army. I said goodbye to Morris and wished him luck in his search for his wife, Elka. Almost a year later I received a letter from Morris telling me that he had finally found Elka, in Rome, Italy. He also told me that they had applied for immigration to the United States. About five years afterwards, either in 1949 or 1950, they made it to New York.. In time they moved out to Oakland, California where Morris found work. His wife Elka, who had been a school teacher in her native country, enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley to earn her teaching credential so she could teach in California. I visited them in the Bay Area after they arrived in Oakland.

MATAGA: Was she able to speak English also?

KURATA: Yes, she spoke very good English too. Later they moved to San Bernardino in Southern California where Morris was engaged in the export-import business. Elka began teaching in a local high school.. I had a chance to get together with Morris and Elka again a good many years ago when Morris attended one of our 442nd Regimental Combat Team Reunion in Los Angeles. We had a chance to reminisce again and relive our days in Germany. Several years ago I received a letter from Elka telling me that Morris had a heart attack and died. I guess I'll always remember Morris. He was a very interesting person, someone you don't run across every day.

MATAGA: I'm sure he remembered you all of his life too.

KURATA: Oh yes, he did . That's one of my experiences that I thought would be interesting to relate. Another one is an episode in my life which may be of interest since it concerns the feelings of the Lodi community toward Japanese American shortly after W.W.II. This occurred in 1946 when I was invited to join the Lodi American Legion Post by Verne Hoffman, Sr., a Legionnaire, who at the time was a Lodi High School agriculture teacher and a rancher.

MATAGA: Caucasian?

KURATA: Yes. He was a Caucasian and he had known me for a very long time. His son, Vern, Jr., had been a Boy Scout when I had been a Boy Scout. I had heard from some people that during W.W.II he (the father) had opposed the return of the Japanese Americans to Lodi. But he changed his mind when his son who was serving in the Army in the South Pacific told him that if he wanted to fight the Japanese [Nationals] to go to the South Pacific, and to stop discriminating against the loyal Japanese Americans in the United States.

KURATA: [discussion deleted] The son convinced his father to change his attitude toward the Japanese Americans. Later he asked me to join the American Legion Post, and introduced me and another Nisei veteran, Masao Funamura, at the Legionnaires Meeting. We received a rousing welcome from all the other Legionnaires. This certainly surprised me because I had not expected such a warm reception. You see, the American Legion, along with the Veterans of Foreign War organization, had opposed the return of the Japanese Americans to the west coast during the war. Later on they both dropped their opposition and they subsequently supported the redress program for Japanese Americans. Now, both the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars are much more friendly toward the Japanese American people. It goes to show you that people can change their attitudes when they find the truth.

MATAGA: Yes, it was the truth that made them change.

KURATA: So much of the discrimination against the Japanese was due to war hysteria and to propaganda that was spread around to make the American people hate the Japanese. Propaganda which in turn made the soldiers fight harder. That's part of propaganda and war.

MATAGA: Thank you Jim. Anything else that you'd like to add?

KURATA: No I think I've covered what I thought might be of interest to any one reading the story.

MATAGA: This concludes the life history of James Kurata. Thank you.

[End Tape Two, Side B]

NAME LIST

NAME	IDENTIFICATION	SOURCE OF VERIFICATION	PAGE INTRODUCED
Yosaku Kurata	Jim's father	Jim Kurata	1
Kenji Kurata	Jim's step-father	"	1
Kotoyo Takao	Jim's mother's maiden name	"	1
Merry Hisaye Kurata	Jim's sister	"	1
Joseph Yoshito Kurata	Jim's brother	"	1
Hattie Sueko Kurata	Jim's sister	"	2
Fred Sadaji Kurata	Jim's brother	"	2
Lloyd Fujitani	Scout friend	"	4
Martin Wilson	"	"	4
Mark Wade	Scoutmaster	"	4
Rosetta Perkins	Jim's girlfriend in grammar school	"	6
James Corson	College counselor	"	8
Everett McKenzie	Caucasian family friend	"	14
Edwin Wood	Army friend	"	15
Red Daniels	Co-worker	"	17
Misako Mildred (Morodomi)	Jim's wife	"	19
Janis (Kurata) Purcell	Jim's daughter	"	19

NAME	IDENTIFICATION	SOURCE OF VERIFICATION	PAGE INTRODUCED
John Purcell	Jim's son-in-law	"	19
Patrick Purcell	Jim's grandson	"	19
Jenna Purcell	Jim's granddaughter	"	19
Denis Kurata	Jim's son	"	19
Patricia Chan	Jim's daughter-in-law's maiden name	"	19
Cheryl Kurata	Jim's granddaughter	"	19
Jessica Kurata	Jim's granddaughter	"	19
James Raymond Kurata	Jim's grandson	"	19
Cliff Temby	Man who hired Jim	"	26
Tom Kurahara	Friend (Lodi JACL Board Member)	"	27
Mike Masaoka	JACL Activist	"	27
Morris	Jewish ex-prisoner of Dachau (Germany)	"	29
Bloom	"	"	30
Elka	Morris' wife	"	30
Verne Hoffman, Sr.	Lodi American Legion Member	"	31
Verne Hoffman, Jr.	Son of Hoffman, Sr.	"	31
Masao Funamura	Lodi friend-W.W.II Veteran	"	32